

I told Sarah that my hard drive had crashed on Saturday afternoon. I'd have to go in Sunday night to upload my backup disks. I might be gone all night. I gave her a peck. The sun was setting in burnt orange glory when I drove my pickup out of Austin.

The park was closed when I got there. I drove back to the highway and parked under a huge pine garlanded with Spanish moss. I climbed on top of my car and leapt over the barbed wire. The moon was beginning to rise, but it was still difficult to see. I limited my flashlight use hoping to avoid the park ranger's attention. After five minutes of cautious jogging I could hear the spring. I slowed my pace and corrected my direction.

"We've been waiting for you. We hoped you would come tonight."

A shadow voice, and there in the shadows two green eyes glowing like a cat's. She moved slightly so that I was able to make her out from the background.

"We knew you would come. I told the others that you could see me. After you've been here a while they can't see you by daylight."

I asked, "Are you one of the Nine?"

She laughed and said, "There are only eight of us now and we need another. No I'm not one of the Nine. We are only vessels. They come to dance, but they need bodies. This has been going on for a long time – long before there were men. They've used trees, birds, the serpent, and other things that you're not ready to comprehend. Come, drink of the spring so you will be ready."

"I'm not going. I know what happened to Thorn."

"There have been hundreds since Thorn yet we remember him. He is here." She pointed at her temple. "Our physical lives are shortened by the dance, but the whole of our beings are sucked into the Nine. You must hurry, when the moonlight hits the spring they come. You must be ready."

"I'm not going."

"Stay and watch the dance. Then you'll see. Come."

"Who are you?"

"My old name doesn't matter any more. The Nine know how to find me. That's what's important."

She took me by the arm. The others were laying around the spring. They barely moved even to breathe. All the colour had been drained from them. The oldest wore what might have been a '60s mod outfit.

I found a boulder to sit on.

And waited.

The moon slowly rode across the sky. How many people danced here? Americans, Spanish, Lippan Apache. She had said that trees had danced. Had the need for "vessels" changed humans into what they are – the memory of the Nine being the original impulse to Art? But Silander warns that the Nine are not the friends of men.

Then the moonlight touched the spring. Each bubble glowed like a star. Nine fine tendrils of light came out of the spring. Eight of them swirled into the men and women laying around the spring. A ninth darted toward me, but stopped inches away. It moved up and down – seeking a point of entry. Then it shot back to and within the spring.

The eight stood up. They joined hands and began to circle the spring. Their movements increased in speed and suddenly their feet were beginning to leave the ground. Their legs lifted behind them while their heads and hands bent toward it. They hung in the air a moment then they began shooting away from the disc. Then the dance began. It involved every movement of the classical repertory, of belly dancing, of popular dancing forms. It involved the trees and stones and curves of local space. It invoked every human emotion and some moods that humans lack words for. I knew that I would be spending the rest of my life trying to express those feelings.

There was flight and crawling, the erotic and the frightening, there was tumbling and moments of exquisite statuary stillness. I realized that this dance took part of its shape from the position of Earth, Moon, Sun, and the slowly drifting continents. I knew this dance was occurring at sulphur springs under the sea – danced by strange creatures for which science has no name. I knew it was danced in the Arctic, in deserts, and in jungles. Perhaps even on other planets.

All this I knew from the dance.

"Hey – what are you jokers doing?"

The words were like boulders, crashing white into my mind. A woman park ranger had come up behind us. I felt as if my skin had been ripped away.

At the park ranger's yell, the bodies fell to the earth. She'd broken their concentration and their misstep had halted the dance all over the world. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to kill her more than if I had seen her bash a baby's head on the asphalt. I picked up my boulder, but the eight were quicker. Light streamed from the tops of their heads. The eight bands coalesced into a harsh bright rod. The ranger was undoing the leather buckle which held her gun when the light struck. The great light probed her like the lesser light had probed me. It forced its way in. Her body hadn't been fortified by the spring. The great rhythm began to make her move. There was a beauty in her dance – like the colours and symmetries of an A-bomb explosion. Light began to pour from her eyes, from her mouth, from her sex, from each strand of her hair. The rhythm increased. I became aware of the boulder I was holding. I let it drop in front of me. Her skin began to rip and her bones to tear. But still she had the look of fierce ecstasy that the eight had had. The light left her and she fell boneless like a one-year-old falls.

The great light poured back into the spring. I could smell her blood and entrails over the sulphur stench.

The eight had gone to whatever hiding place where they wait for their monthly chance at Heaven. I thought of all the ways the Nine had been represented by mankind – the muses, the Nine Unknown (said by Tibetan Lamaists to rule the earth), the Ennead of the Egyptians, Odhinn and his eight other forms. All derived from the burning dance of ecstasy, a dance that certain hidden springs in certain hidden places could cool. I could join them. I could be One of the Nine at least for the moment of the dance.

I thought of my wife, and of my marriage, which had cooled into an eternal afternoon. Like endless croquet. Did I want comfort or ecstasy? Or did I just want the one moment of knowing what no one else knew – the one moment of the pale fire of knowing a

getting back." I stopped at the door and let them lead me into the station.

It was pretty minimal. A science outfit with living quarters, two bathrooms and a communal kitchen. There were two labs and a storage shed with a freezer. Nowhere to run; these boys were rats in a box. Now I was too.

The rats introduced themselves. Oral Detbar, the one who'd spoken first, was fifty or so, his face gaunt behind old-fashioned glasses. He had the bodiless, limp handshake of a lifelong scientist. He'd been on Halfgone the longest. Mitchell Yp and Eddy Spanic were what was left of his staff.

All three of them looked sweaty, overtired, and jumpy with fear. More than I would have expected, even given the situation as Suit had laid it out. Maybe there was something I didn't know yet.

"So where's the Godball?" I said, trying to be jaunty.

Nobody took the cue. All three men looked at the floor. The fluorescent lights flickered and the generator hummed. The place had the feel of a tomb. They didn't even have a mother voice playing.

"Yes," said Detbar. "The Godball. We have to talk to you about that."

"Okay," I said. "Whatever. Can I take a shower first. I'm just out of the Womb, y'know?"

They looked at me as if I'd proposed a group shower, Detbar grumbling up a cough, Spanic screwing up his features in distaste, Yp smiling weakly, intrigued but wondering if he'd heard wrong.

"Shower," I said. "Me. Bathroom. Be right back."

Detbar found his tongue, quickly showed me the extra bedroom. As I went inside I heard Yp and Spanic quietly arguing.

This was not a calm bunch.

The room was a shambles, like the rest of the place. I dropped the luggage trunk of extra Suit-stuff on the floor, and stripped. As I dropped Suit on the bed his spinal matrix wriggled free and clung to my wrist; I opened my mouth and he ran up my arm, and in. Suit and I were never far apart. The bathroom had two doors, one leading to the opposite bedroom. I locked it and turned on the shower.

Right away I heard them rummaging in my room. I let them go at it. Suit's discarded material was inert and unrevealing without his spine. A minute later the door burst open. Detbar and Spanic, both holding guns on me. No sign of Yp.

"Out of the shower."

I stepped out.

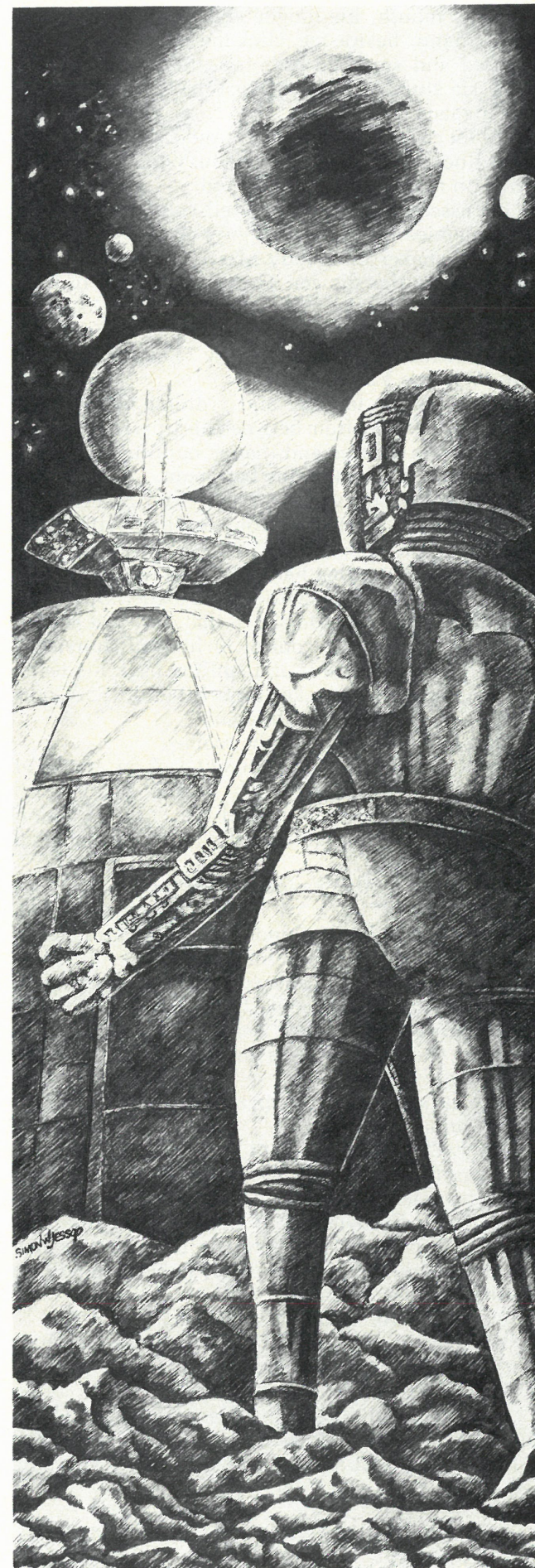
"We decided we can't trust you," said Spanic. "You might be concealing the Assassin. You might be the Assassin. We don't know what form it will take."

"I don't know what form it will take either," I said. "But it probably won't want a shower."

Spanic made an ugly face and raised his weapon to my head. "Shut up," he said. I decided he didn't like me.

Detbar began a halfhearted and clumsy search in two of the three places I could still have something hidden. I don't know how long it had been since the last woman left Halfgone, but what Detbar had forgotten could fill up an anatomy book.

When he stood up I kissed him. Suit harpooned his tongue, then climbed out of my mouth and draped



Illustrations by Simon Jessop